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SUBJECT: UNHCR Highlights Displaced Persons in Urban Settings

11. (U) SUMMARY: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, convened "The High Commissioner's Dialogue on Persons of Concern (POCs) in Urban Setting" on December 9 and 10, 2009. A variety of actors (including mayors, police, parliamentarians, host government representatives, donors, international and local NGOs, academics, and actual UNHCR beneficiaries) discussed the unique challenges of addressing the needs of refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons, and host populations in cities and towns (rather than camps placed in rural areas). Challenges include identifying persons of concern, assessing their vulnerabilities, ensuring protection space in urban settings, promoting livelihoods and self-reliance, and bolstering strained municipalities and local authorities. At the end of the conference, High Commissioner Guterres vowed to pursue an ambitious agenda of follow-up actions to improve UNHCR's response to urban POCs in partnership with other stakeholders. The USG urged UNHCR to focus on its core mandate, refugees and stateless persons (rather than IDPs and urban development) and issue operational guidance to its field staff on how to implement its new urban refugee policy. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) USDel was led by PRM Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Margaret Pollack. It included U.S. Mission Geneva Refugee and Migration Affairs (RMA) Counselor Peter Mulrean, RMA Attach Melissa Pitotti, PRM/PRP Policy Officer Sarah Cross and RMA Program Specialist Michelle Burdon.

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UNHCR SHOWCASES ITS NEW URBAN REFUGEE POLICY  
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13. (U) According to UNHCR's most recent statistics, almost half of the world's 10.5 million refugees now reside in cities and towns, compared to one third who live in camps. UNHCR's policy on urban refugees, which was issued in September 2009, is based on the principle that the rights of refugees and UNHCR's mandated responsibilities towards them are not affected by their location. UNHCR considers urban areas to be a legitimate place for refugees to enjoy their rights, which they consider to include: the right not to be arbitrarily detained; the right to family unity; the right to adequate food, shelter, health and education; and the right to livelihoods opportunities. During his opening session speech, the High Commissioner said of the new policy: 1) it is not developed in isolation from other urban poor; 2) it is focused on development as well as humanitarian relief; and 3) it is inclusive (not focused on UNHCR alone). He said the policy would be mainstreamed into UNHCR's operations in 2011, but its implementation would be contingent upon donor funding.

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STAKEHOLDERS EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS  
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14. (U) A handful of selected UNHCR beneficiaries presented their views during a special panel discussion. A Colombian IDP named Senaida related her experience being displaced four times within her own country. Ahmed, a humorous Somali refugee who lived through the xenophobic attacks of 2008 in South Africa, explained how, when he was a youth, a ship he had hired to go to Yemen dropped him off in South Africa, instead. An Iraqi refugee woman in Amman named Maha

who serves as a community outreach volunteer for UNHCR described how refugees came forward to register after they realized the benefits of doing so (access to food, medical care, rental stipends, and resettlement). A 19-year-old Congolese refugee described her family's joy at being resettled in a town in Sweden. Sabri, a Crimean Tartar who was stateless until attaining Ukrainian citizenship in 1997, highlighted the hardships for those who lack citizenship (the lack of mobility and inability to access education, work, pensions and medical care).

15. (U) During the opening session, the mayor of Geneva, Remy Pagani, called for greater support to local authorities to help them cope with increased crime, trafficking, potential xenophobia, and humanitarian assistance needs in way that is consistent across regions. Host state representatives regularly expressed concern about the burden posed by refugees in their cities and towns. A Sudanese representative drew attention to the unfinished urban registration exercise in his country, and called for more capacity and assistance to finish the job. A representative from Hong Kong complained about the delays in the Refugee Status Determination process there, claiming it takes one year to get an interview in Hong Kong and causes great psychosocial damage to asylum seekers, who are not permitted to work. The Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Aisal Miqdad spoke about the direct negative consequences Iraqi refugees have had on the Syrian economy and social infrastructure (schools, hospital, etc.), and called for conference participants to focus on supporting voluntary repatriation (a call echoed by the Iraqi and Jordanian representatives). The Armenian and Serbian representatives emphasized the lack of affordable housing for the urban displaced. NGOs pressed for alternatives to arbitrary detention, opportunities for self-reliance, a UNHCR policy on urban IDPs, stronger involvement of community-based organizations, and increased UNHCR legal, protection, and advocacy role. Germany called for better educational opportunities for the urban displaced to decrease their vulnerabilities.

16. (U) Conference participants divided into four working groups. A group led by Walter Kaelin, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), emphasized that IDPs remain in their country of origin and are thus entitled to all rights available to the general population, including the right to work. The group concluded that it is not necessary (indeed, it is potentially harmful) to individually register IDPs in urban settings. These populations can be generally "profiled" instead. Family unity and non-displaced family members are especially important sources of support for IDPs. Local authorities and municipal structures need to be informed about the rights of IDPs and supported so they can serve IDPs as well as the host populations.

17. (U) The other groups focused on urban refugees. Their findings converged on the following issues:

- The centrality of local governments in ensuring protection. Although both national and local governments may not be pleased about the existence of urban refugees, the local governments nonetheless are obliged to deal with the reality of their presence. UNHCR, donor governments and NGOs need to reach out directly to local governments to gain their acceptance of, and support for, urban refugees, including the granting of legal status in their territories.
- The importance of comprehensive registration, which identifies people with protection needs, provides them with important documentation of their status, and helps local governments to better plan services. The use of mobile registration teams was encouraged in order to more effectively reach these dispersed and mobile populations.
- The effectiveness of outreach. In situations where urban refugees prefer to remain "invisible," outreach through community organizations, churches and NGOs can be effective in identifying particularly vulnerable cases and in doing surveys to develop a good profile of the urban refugee population and its needs.
- The connection between local communities to the strategy and solutions. Conducting public information and awareness campaigns and providing services to the broader community (and not just to refugees) will promote acceptance (or at least reduce xenophobia), and reduce the need for refugees to "go underground." Examples included community centers or sports facilities for this dual-use

approach, as well as creating "local trustees," made up of community leaders, school directors, municipal officials, etc.

-- The role of refugee camps. UNHCR's Africa Bureau Director suggested that it might prove impossible to revamp the approach towards urban refugees without improving conditions in camps. Introduction of protection services and assistance in the cities could result in an exodus from the camps. Thus, there is a need to make the camps and settlements themselves a place of safety and rights, not of risk.

-- The need for development and livelihoods. There were many calls for integrating urban refugee needs into development plans and for working with local and international businesses to develop livelihood opportunities for urban refugees. Some Dialogue participants raised concerns that development actors were not present at the Dialogue.

-- The complexity of mixed migratory flows. There was a call for more thinking to be done on addressing the protection and assistance needs of migratory populations that do not qualify for refugee status. Some suggested there should be a referral system for those not qualifying for refugee status from UNHCR, but in need of protection nonetheless. If so, to whom would these migrants be referred?

-- The importance of partnerships with NGOs, community organizations, municipal authorities, development actors and the private sector in providing assistance and transitioning from relief to development programs.

-- The benefits of civic education. A representative from a community receiving many asylum seekers in Canada underscored the importance of educating the local population of the plight of these persons and the responsibility they have as a community to support and encourage them.

-- The value of transitional programs and exit strategies. One group underlined the need for UNHCR to plan ahead to when its programs would slow down, or transition, in a particular urban area.

Some also argued for the need to recognize that many refugees will choose to remain in urban areas permanently, rather than return to their rural places of origin when conditions permit.

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NEXT STEPS: AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA TO BE ROLLED OUT OVER TIME

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18. (U) UNHCR will harness the momentum of this event with the following activities: 1) slightly modifying UNHCR's urban refugee policy to incorporate views expressed at the Dialogue; 2) identifying five pilot cities for the urban policy roll-out in 2010 (perhaps Kigali, Nairobi, Cairo, Kuala Lumpur, and Cuenca); 3) conducting regional workshops; 4) issuing guidance to UNHCR field staff on how to work with mayors; 5) maintaining an international network of mayors; and 6) carrying out evaluations to inform planning for 2012. The USG urged UNHCR to expeditiously issue operational guidance to its field staff to help them implement UNHCR's new urban refugee policy; however, the High Commissioner prefers to implement the policy in a phased approach based on available resources. The USG urged UNHCR to focus on its core mandate (refugees and stateless persons, rather than IDPs and urban development); UNHCR subsequently withdrew from its list of follow-up actions the creation of an urban IDP policy. For more information on the Dialogue, see: [www.unhcr.org/hc-dialogue](http://www.unhcr.org/hc-dialogue).

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